

Shaping the possible city: between choice and chance

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## through Urban Growth Strategies

ial Integration through Urban Growth Strategies) is a network of twinned cities that provides perience and good practices of partner cities, Universities, civic organizations and social groups ation through joint development of urban growth strategies. The project has enriched the sense of anding between European citizens by bringing upfront problems and issues of urban life that are by sharing common values, history and culture in an open dialog.

form for creative and open debate between local authorities, academics, experts, civil activists and ities about the problem of social integration in ever-growing cities. The SINERGI Book Two – provides the insight and exploration of the knowledge, practices, research and experience in facing nporary cities. The purpose of this book is to provide a wide frame for the democratic tools that will their right to the city, to provoke decision makers to create innovative policies and, through critical ships between the inclusive/exclusive city and the citizens, to create a better future for our cities.



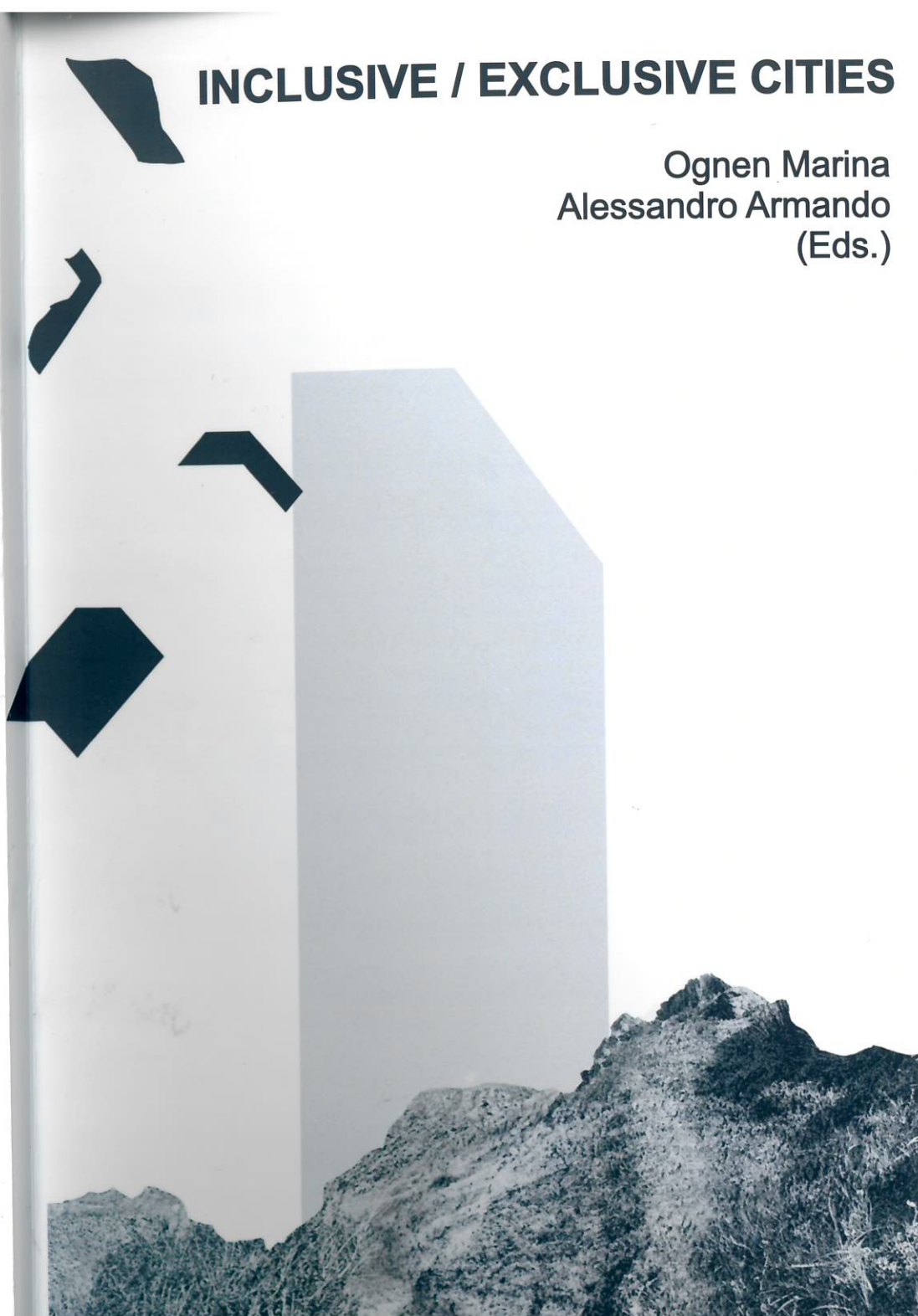
Ognen Marina  
Alessandro Armando  
(Eds.)

## INCLUSIVE / EXCLUSIVE CITIES

SINERGI  
LA INTEGRAZIONE TERRITORIALE E URBANA COME STRATEGIA

## INCLUSIVE / EXCLUSIVE CITIES

Ognen Marina  
Alessandro Armando  
(Eds.)



## Contents

<i>Ognen Marina, Alessandro Armando</i> Inclusive / Exclusive Cities	8
<i>Panos Mantziaras</i> The 24 hour non-stop Metropolis: Building up the Greater Paris collective narrative	12
<b>Chapter 1. Democratic Tools for Development of Inclusive Cities</b>	
<i>João Cabral</i> The Inclusive City as the New Urban Question and the Challenges for Urban Policies and Planning	32
<i>Francesca Frassoldati</i> Shaping the Possible City: Between Choice and Chance	44
<i>Chiara Lucchini</i> Committing to City Spaces: Notes on the Italian experience of the "Urban Commons Regulations"	54
<b>Chapter 2. The Right to the City - Promising Concepts and Practices</b>	
<i>Isabel Raposo</i> Marginal Urban Areas urban metamorphosis: A New Global Phenomenon Needs New Ways of Thinking and Intervening	68
<i>Leonardo Ramondetti</i> Urban Interiors: Visions for a fragmented territory	92
<i>Aleksandra Djukić, Milena Vukmirović, Eva Vanista Lazarević</i> Implementation of Creative Cities concept for greater inclusion: Case study Belgrade.	104
<i>Gabriela Maksymiuk, Kinga Kimic</i> 'Green Projects' in Participatory Budgets inclusive initiatives for creating city's top quality public spaces. Warsaw case study	120
<i>Divna Pencić, Stefanka Hadji Pecova, Snezana Domazetovska, Frosina Stojanovska</i> Urban Planning Models in Skopje and their impact on the	136

<i>Jovan Ivanovski, Ana Ivanovska Deskova, Vladimir Deskov</i> Post-socialist City in Transition: Emergence of Inclusiveness in Housing Design	154
<i>Ana Ivanovska Deskova, Vladimir Deskov, Jovan Ivanovski</i> Inclusiveness as Urban and Architectural Concept The case of the post-earthquake renewal of Skopje	172
<i>Jelena Djekic, Milena Dinic, Petar Mitkovic, Milica Igic</i> Quality of life in urban studies and planning practice	192
<i>Stefano Pensa, Elena Masala, Francesca Abastante, Stefano Fraire, Riccardo Gagliarducci, Cristina Marietta, Camila M. Zyngier</i> Inclusive Processes: Concepts and Instruments for Sharing the Spatial Information	206
<b>Chapter 3. Architectural Monuments for Civic Society</b>	
<i>Marija Mano Velevska, Slobodan Velevski, Ognen Marina</i> The Valences of the Micro-city	222
<i>Violeta Bakalcev, Minas Bakalcev, Mitko Hadzi Pulja, Sasa Tasic</i> Exclusive Cities Inclusive Buildings	242
<i>Goran Mickovski, Aleksandar Radevski, Bojan Karanakov</i> Transformation of Industrial Space in the Context of Post-Socialist Transition of the City of Skopje	264
<i>Ana Mrđa, Tihomir Jukić</i> Zagreb City Transformation - From Infrastructural Node to City Central Area	282
<b>Chapter 4. Exclusion, Diversity and Conviviality at Local Scale</b>	
<i>Maria Manuela Mendes, Olga Magano</i> Territories of exclusion the reproduction of social and urban inequalities in Lisbon Metropolitan Area	298
<i>Maria Manuela Mendes</i> Mouraria quarter and Intendente area in Lisbon (Portugal) from infamous neighbourhood to a cosmopolitan place	310
<i>Chiara Massimino</i> Skopje. In need of alternatives: Investigations and scenarios	328
<i>Edoardo Bruno</i> Community, real estate pressure and the spatial reorganization the case study of the "village in the city" of Lijiao in Guangzhou	346

<i>Leonora Grcheva, Michele Vianello</i> Enhancing participation in Macedonian Detailed Urban Plans: The case of Novo Maalo, Skopje	366
<b>Chapter 5. Inclusive Citizens – Exclusive Cities</b>	
<i>Frank Eckardt, Ivana Sidzimovska</i> Creativity for Integration Contested integration of refugees and the art project "My house is your house!" in Gera, Germany	382
<i>Bojan Karanakov, Aleksandar Radevski, Goran Mickovski</i> Accessibility as Exclusivity	396
<i>Zsófia Hannemann-Tamás</i> International Students: Included or Excluded Social Groups?	406
<i>Vladimir B. Ladinski, Elizabeta B. Mukaetova-Ladinska</i> Silver Cities of To-Morrow: Integration of People with Dementia in the Built Environment – the UK Approach	424
<i>Davide Vero</i> The Age of Urban Ageing: An overview of different social and spatial answers to ageing	440

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## Acknowledgments

## Credits



Francesca Frassoldati

# Shaping the Possible City: Between Choice and Chance

## ABSTRACT:

With the financial crisis threatening the most diverse aspects of urban life, cities have to cope with the uncertainty generated by any modification in their economic, cultural, or spatial status quo. Cities face tendencies such as inertial resistance to change, bureaucratic decision loops, and budget constraints. In most cases, cities operate by reducing the risk of decision-making; however, processes of urban transformation still occur. In the light of this technical pragmatism, the following chapter outlines a discourse on 'effectiveness' in urban transformations: what are the implications of inclusive practices, potential matters in compromising, and how decision making might be alternatively approached.

**KEYWORDS:** Urban transformation, urban process, decision making, inclusive/exclusive process

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In a time of rapid transformation of existing cities, a popular trend worldwide is the specialization of urban change and urban regeneration: notions that have been generally associated with the urban space, such as smartness, cultural value, innovation capacity, and eventually resilience, are singled out as explicit targets that designated pilot districts or neighbourhoods should achieve. Urban systems have, in most cases, survived for centuries as a result of their inherent adaptive capacity to transforming contexts. Public aspirations are expressed in catch words such as 'smart city', 'city of culture', and 'resilient city'. The notion that cities should perform according to selected universal criteria is, for instance, the very basis of most international think tanks' guidelines and recommendations on eligibility under the available funding schemes.

Increasingly, the performative notion (i.e. how some specific aspects of the urban environment can be measured and compared via common indicators) has been assumed in the public discourse as a demand for the urban environment to conform to agreed indicators. Cities are requested to be more sustainable, more accessible, and more equal. In the best cases, such mobilization has achieved important targets. However, it is worth questioning what the implications are in pursuing better performances when designated indicators are measured. To some extent, the bottom-up requirement for better urban quality that dismantled the core of standardized planning rules implemented by modern urban planning traditions is replicating similar models when designated targets are translated into normative approaches (Albrechts & Balducci, 2013). In the last twenty years, a new 'bureaucracy' has emerged that specifically focuses on sustainability and stakeholders, for example.

Strategies of participation and inclusion in public decisions about spatial transformations are no exception. It is increasingly common throughout the world for citizens to have their say in public choices about the city they live in. Inclusive strategies may serve as a method to overcome administrative constraints, making the process of making decisions about the city more democratic. Non-mediated inclusion is recommended by numerous international organizations to counterbalance both uncontrolled administrative procedures and citizens' disaffection towards the public and collective sphere that is undermining consolidated tools of representative democracy. However, enthusiastic approaches to participation fail to recognize that citizens' engagement can be approached technically and bureaucratically without producing and/or reproducing any public value other than conformity to a settled procedure.

The European Union funded project *Social Integration through Urban Growth Strategies* (SINERGI) provided the setting for four cities to share their experiences on inclusion and exclusion in the practices of urban transformation. The cases presented at the final conference in Skopje, which mostly regard the four cities in question, Skopje, Turin, Zagreb, and Lisbon, illustrated problematic definition, implementation, and critical evaluation of



inclusive practices and excluding attitudes. The pages that follow, in which I elaborate on the contents of the keynote speech delivered at the conference in Skopje, present more general thoughts on some of the implicit issues in the programmatic integration of design and social aspects connected with urban transformation.

To provide a common prospective framework, I will begin with some methodological concerns. Many of the essays that follow have been written by active groups that have studied or professionally worked in the urban space which they examine. These groups articulated a number of contributions that look at the same city or eventually the same urban neighbourhood from different angles. Although they arguably share a common 'frame of reference', since most of the contributions critically regard recent neoliberal trends in urban policies and adopt a variety of bottom-up approaches to problem setting and problem solving, the works develop into independent threads. Lefebvre's work on the 'right to the city' and Marcuse's critical rephrasing 'whose right, what right and to what city?', which many referred to at the conference in an effort to understand urban struggles, paved the way for a multitude of specifications and distinctions in which particularities overcome any tentative general answers.

In one of his short essays on complexity, Ilya Prigogine (1987: 97) wrote that, 'Wherever we look, we find evolution, diversification and instabilities'. In a world characterized by intrinsic complexity, there are no excuses to procrastinate in offering tentative explanations of single phenomena if doing so improves our understanding and makes 'the gap between "simple" and "complex", between "disorder" and "order" [...] narrower than it was thought before' (Prigogine, 1987: 98). Many of the following works initially expose a situation of apparent disorder or uncoordinated activism that is later illustrated as reasonable in light of the general situation in which it is embedded. The piecemeal approach disfavours broad frames and solutions and instead privileges manageable and effective experiments with limited or well-defined scopes. My contention is that punctual interventions and informed activism at the scale in which general problems become apparent in the physical urban space are more likely to coexist rather than substitute comprehensive planning pictures.

Coexistence is a direct implication of complexity in urban processes. As long as problems cannot be linearly described, the notion of one unique solution should be replaced by a series of incremental optimizations or ameliorations—through which multiple diversified stages come into being. Following Bourdieu's conceptualization (1991, pp. 40 and 45–46), the condition could be described as the contemporary shift from an ontology of end-state being-in-the-world to a notion of becoming-in-the-world. Places are in a state of continuous change, even if they are conceived and described by their persistent 'changelessness'. Design professionals live with the disciplinary contradiction of focusing almost entirely on end-state design whereas design implementation is made possible via incremental stages.

Indeed, there is hardly room for an implicit distancing of professionals' ideal configurations and reality as it is. Both design professions and urban policies have to confront the unfinished status of place and social process. Inclusion and exclusion have specific developments in the framework of complexity when the coexistence of different alternatives is hypothesized simultaneously. I propose four issues to frame a debate around inclusion and exclusion in urban practices through comparative cases that aim at establishing a common dialogue among reciprocally remote locations.

## 2 URBAN AMBITION

Even amidst troublesome urban contexts, urban space is by definition the opposite of isolation and singular conditions. Urban space is a collective matter and (re)generates common resources and a redistribution of costs. There are many ways in which difficulties, actions, and failures direct or inspire future pathways. Eventually, in urban contexts not only are durable investments worthy of appreciation, but even doing nothing, surviving mistakes, or withdrawing competitive schemes at the right time can serve as useful lessons.

Is this uncertainty something that specifically characterizes our contemporary times? I was particularly inspired by the epilogue to the unfinished construction of the Cathedral of Siena mentioned in the introduction to the Italian and French versions of *Moral Calculations*, a relevant volume on game theory written by Lazlo Méré (1998). It is a story of urban adaptation, public engagement, and strategic choices that dates back 500 years. Siena had a cathedral in the fourteenth century, but in 1339 the city decided to enlarge it, adding a second massive body to the original building. It would have doubled the size of the structure with an entirely new nave and two aisles to which the pre-existing nave would have served as the perpendicular transept. A number of unexpected occurrences, such as construction errors, the Black Death in 1348, and financial mismanagement, halted the completion of the cathedral and the work has never been resumed since. However, the outer walls of this extension remain and can now be seen on the side of the Duomo; the floor of the uncompleted nave paves a public open space. Though unfinished, the remains are a testament to local power and misdirected ambition. Méré's epilogue notes that instead of falling into a common social trap, in which those who started the investment continue to pile up extra resources in order to actualize their initial idea, people in fourteenth-century Siena gave up the competition with other cities in the region to have the most magnificent cathedral. They made a rational decision to adapt the initial idea to the different context that emerged a few years later. In the end, they had a cathedral completed, although it was smaller than imagined during the previous exciting season. What is more, that decision in most cases goes unnoticed, even if the unfinished remains were not eliminated. What was not used according to the original design was used to fit other purposes.



At this point, M  r   (1998, p. 6) highlights that contrary to common game traps, in which players are unwilling to give up their initial stake, the city of Siena not only withdrew from the game but also decided not to invest in removing the sign of that turnover, saving extra resources to guarantee that the church and its surroundings were restored to their original conditions. The 'error' was included in the formation of a different space. Inclusion and exclusion thus also reflect the grade of complexity and the number of alternatives that may be incorporated into public decisions.

In 1998, the British government commissioned the Construction Task Force (CTF) chaired by Sir John Egan, a report on the status of the domestic construction industry and a consequent set of recommendations. The report included the following striking conclusion:

...studies in the USA, Scandinavia and this country [UK] suggest that up to 30% of construction is rework, labour is used at only 40–60% of potential efficiency, accidents can account for 3–6% of total project costs, and at least 10% of materials are wasted. (CTF, 1998: 15)

No other sectors in manufacturing can coexist with such low performances. Therefore, one possible way to make public decisions related with the urban space more inclusive is to learn how to coexist and manage the divergence between initial ambitions or intentions and their implementation. To some extent, all decision makers and professionals should be concerned about the outcomes and implementation that are pertinent to the urban project. Far from halting decisions, this concern might have some elements in common with an evaluation that is also adaptive to evolving situations and does not pertain solely to the end state or conclusion.

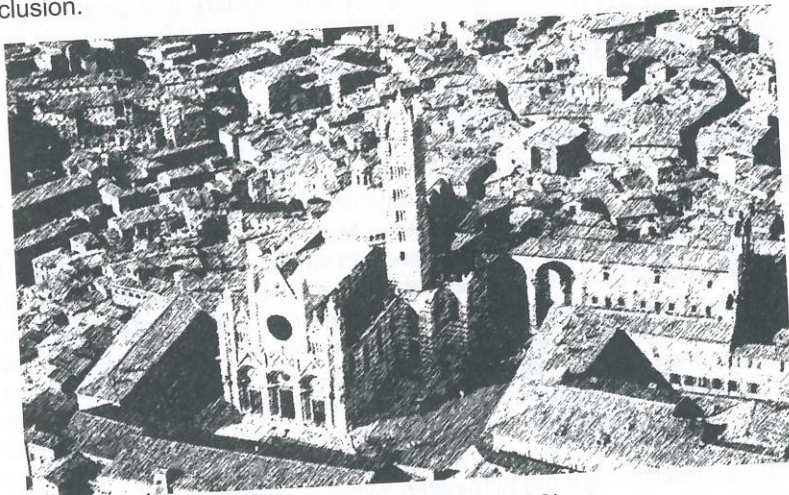


Figure 1. The cathedral of Siena

### 3 THE RISK OF DECISION

One could argue that this notion of inclusion of alternative developments into urban processes produces little effects, as it reproduces technical prescriptions of tools designated for managing the urban space. The difference, however, is in the principles guiding a programmatic inclusion of alternatives and not an ex-post confirmation/verification of what has been decided already. Incremental processes of inclusion accept the eventual shift of initial targets. One reference during the discussion in Skopje was the ongoing transformation of the former airport in Hong Kong. The airport was relocated in 1998 from a relatively urbanized area to a more suitable location. It was evident that the abandoned area was in urgent need of transformation, and the local government already had some general ideas regarding those 488 hectares. Due to the massive scale and fragmented use rights, the transformation has gradually taken the form of a two-tiered programme made of large-scale international investments driven by global interests (320 hectares) and a multitude of coordinated efforts that are controlled locally to create a decent place notwithstanding the unpredictable times of the other substantial investments. If regarded now, it is easy to say that the way in which the soft Masterplan phasing of transformation is designed is obviously inclusive of alternatives that were not predictable in the 1990s, and in many cases the people who were engaged in the transformation did not originally know they could have been implicit stakeholders.

However, it is worth reminding the reader that there has been a first 'positioning' in which something different was declared as necessary and a general target was settled as the frame of reference for all efforts to actualize what was at the moment out of reach. Assessing what is 'within, against and beyond the current urban condition' (Chatterton, 2010, p. 235) is an active project. Indeed, it is a possible means of city making. Many contemporary constraints are internalized in this process: firstly, the diminished role for public institutions to define what benefits the majority (which has represented the declared aim of public policies, specifically spatial planning and urban design; see Albrechts & Balducci, 2013). The redefinition of citizenship during and as a result of urban transformation is also implicitly in question. Secondly, problems and approaches have a double meaning comprising both universal and punctual definitions, which may be conflicting. More tax revenue for the government from international investments is not necessarily perceived as benefiting local citizens who demand local urban quality. Thirdly, a general and reassuring sense of continuity of the process may prevail in alternative claims of discontinuity with the past. Continuity is a specific character of the urban space that is continuously used and inhabited, albeit in ever-changing fashion, with rare exceptions.

Within a similar urban narrative, the social network described by Anthony Giddens (1984) adds further operational implications. Instead of rigid pyramids of decision, which characterized the industrial society, Giddens' conceptualization of organizational networks emphasizes their adaptivity to changing contexts, eventually isolating critical pieces to boost the



performance of the system. Therefore, similarities with complex urban systems multiply and a different angle emerges from the network reference to look at urban transformations. Indeed, the experience of fragmentation of both action and change is rather common in the contemporary urban space. Is there any tension towards the recomposition of these urban fragments?

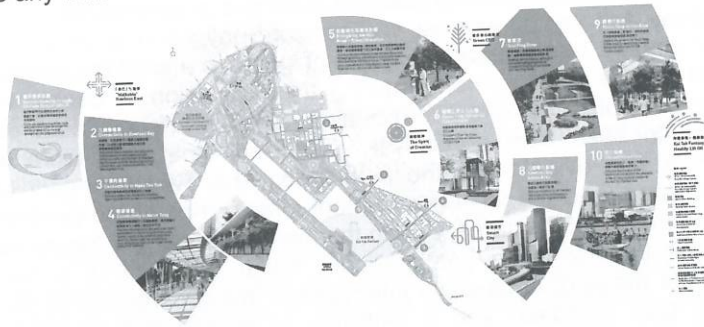


Figure 2. The evolution of a Masterplan

#### 4 IMPLICIT QUESTIONS

The fragmentation and implicit incoherence of urban decisions offer the chance to eventually act on isolated pieces without questioning the existence of the urban system to be transformed. This approach has numerous implications. Beginning with the positive implications, it may be inferred that change is made possible by opportunities of potential effects rather than by need. An ideal definition of the right thing to do is substituted by what is possible in a given context. Yet, the collective dimension of change is then based on singular or particular impulses, i.e. the parts of a network that are suitable for change. The benefit of the many is thus forced to focus on what is changeable, which is indeed a rather narrow notion. Moreover, the city may become more involved in managing procedures that avoid structural questions.

A remarkable point of crisis of European governing system is that governments survive longer in a democratic environment if the risk of their decisions is reduced. An attitude that characterizes critical urban studies is in fact strongly against compromising with governing bureaucratic powers by softening critical conditions with palliative solutions which can constrain the construction of future alternatives. However, pragmatic actions that are generated by singular groups and tactical urban interventions (Godanho, 2015) are the expression of direct forms of decision making and consensus with an inherent limit in terms of size. Even in the best cases, tactical actions are acceptable for a limited group of persons that define and agree on what is right. Moreover, tactical urbanism is made possible by the persistence of a comprehensive background defined by the central policies it antagonizes. To some extent, tactics are concerned with the deconstruction of a complex

situation into a manageable context in which the most striking impediments are disabled (such as bureaucratic procedures, unwilling financial support, and ideological opposition) to favour pragmatic actions. The general intent is thus not far from what a comprehensive and inclusive public process should ideally do. The contexts in which actions take place define whether supplementary collective aspects may apply, such as the recomposition and redistribution of tactical benefits in a broad urban picture.

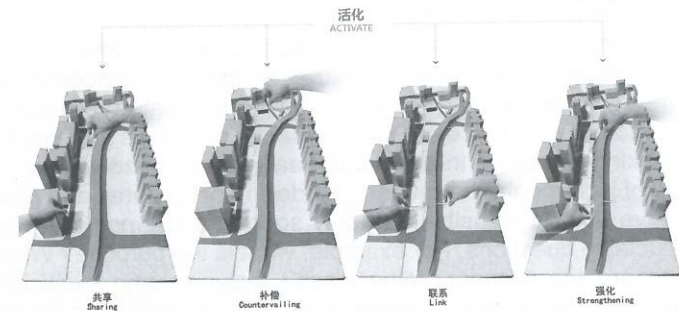


Figure 3. Tactical urbanism

#### 5 IMPLICIT BARRIERS

The opportunity to redefine urban issues based on the chances they provide for tangible effects to take place leads us to reconsider the scope of public action in urban contexts. Government's actions will more easily be approved and implemented to the extent that they are individually reversible and non-compulsory. Bottom-up actions, and particularly those ranging in the grey area between what is allowed and what is illegal, will be taken into positive consideration when unvoiced subjects receive some sort of benefit that, although far from a shared structural solution, provides a temporary frame in which general urban principles are not systematically violated. Again, rather than the conflict or tensions that may arise at some point, it is interesting that the attitude underlying both kinds of action is to move on and incrementally redefine the terms to negotiate in a dialogue.

Different perspectives and paradigms may coexist, but once questions and spaces of negotiation are made explicit, the terms to agree on are directed towards a shifted target. As in many 'wicked' problems related with the urban space (Rittel & Webber, 1973), opportunity mixes with opportunism and occasional choices mix with chances. Whenever urban issues are made specific in this way, it becomes clearer that there is a gap between the capacity to act on a defined scale and with or for a defined target (which does not prevent transformations from taking place) and the ideal image in our mind of the city as a compact entity and a unified society where everyone is actively engaged in public life for the public—and not their own—interests. The picture we get after this description is a city in which



issues and prospects are mostly defined by separate groups. All in all, it is an urban world that works in a way which leaves the impression that the commonality of adjustable interests is the force that aggregates rather than the ground to make differences explicit and accepted.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

To summarise the major arguments discussed above. The discussion began with a description of the new constraints that the understanding of contemporary complexity poses to public decisions related to urban space. In a world of complexity, places are in a state of continuous change. In many respects, making decisions in the public realm corresponds to maintaining this process of incremental adjustment. Modelling procedures and processes make inclusive actions plausible, but only specific and empirical references specify ineluctable questions. For example, what is the purpose? What is the effect? Who are the winners? Who loses? Inclusion and exclusion have different meanings in diverse contexts, while the universalizing language of normative discourse tends to make smooth transitions among any crucial differences. When confronted with oppositions, such as detailing/generalizing, the paradigm of complexity helps us in configuring a multi-scalar world in which different angles may coexist and, in most cases, where polarizing differences obscure more than they reveal: in urban planning and design professions, the fascination for conflict becomes as dangerous as the idealization of consensus. Indeed, they are both elements of the public process rather than bold alternatives.

With a focus on the tension between inclusion and exclusion tensions, we ended up questioning the possibilities for action in an urban world of fragments. Quite often the imageries connected with the direct exercise of decisions by collective groups refer to the poetics of village life and the virtues of self-sufficient sustainable communities. Although this is a possible pragmatic attitude to reach measurable (small-scale) effects to counteract large and complex problems, the recomposition of city imagery on such bases is rather challenging. In other words, a city system can hardly be continuously reconstituted starting with a single parcel whose isolation hinders potential conflictual diversity. While parcels may provide an escape for governing matters, they do not result in a synthesis of universal paradigms. The consequent fragmentation first changes and then becomes a consequence of effects and means. Even for design professions, the request to be specific and place-based, and therefore to specialize in potential outcomes avoiding parochialism, is an everlasting challenge.

The discussion may convey the impression that we have developed an analytical capacity that overcomes our ability to produce positive effects in a complex context. One way for further elaborations to reconfigure urban frames is to focus on the procedures within which single fragments are recomposed. Another approach is to counterbalance singularities with those

current and permanent dimensions that exist only as aggregated urban issues: infrastructure, energy, water, waste, and the like.

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